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And now the telling of...

Sexual Self Esteem and The Church

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Assigned in COM 590: Health Communication Across the Lifespan (Dr. Lauren Amaro)

The Problem

Sexual self-esteem has been defined by several scholars as an individual's "sense of self as a sexual being" and "the value one places on oneself as a sexual being" (Mayers, Heller, & Heller, 2003). This sexual sense of self can be a complex web influenced by things such as experience, external messages, and moral frameworks. In order to conceptualize the multifaceted nature of sexual self-esteem, Zeanah and Schwarz developed components of one's esteem that include:

"The ability to enjoy sex with a partner (skill/experience); personal appraisal of attractiveness to a partner (attractiveness); perception of agency in sexual acts and managing sexual thoughts and feelings (control); the congruence of sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors with personal moral standards (moral judgment); and congruence of sexual behavior with personal aspirations (adaptiveness)." (As cited in Abbott, Harris, & Mollen, 2016)

When one feels positively about oneself in each of these categories, one tends to have positive sexual self-esteem and places overall positive value on oneself as a sexual being. In contrast, negative sexual esteem is associated with sexual anxiety, fear, and depression (Ziaei & Ziaei, 2013).

Though positive sexual self-esteem is desirable for all, studies have shown gender discrepancies in self-reported esteem. Rosenthal, Moore, and Flynn's study (1991) conducted on 1,788 participants across 15 secondary education campuses revealed these discrepancies. Rosenthal et al.'s survey of 17 to 20 year-olds found that

males felt more confident in their "ability to assert their sexual needs" and had overall higher levels of sexual self esteem (p. 71). When it comes to the negative impact of low sexual self-esteem, women have shown to be a particularly at-risk group. A specific group of women especially vulnerable in regard to sexual self-esteem is religious women.

In their study, Abbott, Harris, and Mollen (2016) found that religious women felt negatively about their sexual self-esteem in the categories of moral judgement, control, and adaptiveness. Their findings suggested that 1) religious women are less likely to view their sexual behaviors as acceptable and "congruent with their own moral standards," 2) women who are more committed to their Catholic faith possess more negative views of their sexual selves (in contrast to less committed Catholic women), and 3) Protestant women who "endorse sexually permissive attitudes" possess poorer self-perception of their sexuality (Abbott et al., 2016, p. 1075-1076). Therefore, their study demonstrated the correlation between religious affiliations and more negative feelings of women's sexual self-esteem. Abbott et al.'s study is congruent with previous findings that religious women, with varying motivations and commitment to their religiosity, experience feelings of guilt about their sexual behaviors (Cowden & Bradshaw, 2007).

In addition to feeling conflict between one's moral standards, sexual behaviors, and identity, religious people as a whole have varying sexual beliefs. Scholarship regarding sexual beliefs and attitudes, such as Laumann's book, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (1994), have found that even those within the same religious affiliation hold differing opinions and practices of sex. For example, Christians reported various levels of

experience in specific forms of intercourse such as oral or anal sex, and religiously affiliated respondents held varying beliefs on teenage sex, pornography, and sex outside of marriage (p. 106 & 515). These discrepancies in religious communities could cause individuals to feel greater confusion about their sexual morals. Furthermore, this confusion could hinder one's sexual esteem by complicating the congruence between one's standards and sexual behaviors.

Responsibility of the Church

Religious women are vastly more susceptible to negative sexual self-esteem, and the Church has a great opportunity to address this area of injustice. In 2014, Pew Research found that 70.6% of those living in America identify as Christian ("Religious Landscape Study," 2015). No other institution besides the Christian Church has the ability to touch so many people (Haffner & Ott, 2005). More than 60% of young Americans spend one or more hours at church every week (Haffner & Ott, 2005), and religious participation can positively impact people through increasing moral directives, providing healthy role models, and teaching coping skills (Smith, 2003). Church continues to be a formative environment in which people shape their identity, and one's sexual self-perception and value is an essential aspect of this identity.

The Church has the capability to largely influence the sexual self-esteem of women, and they also have a duty to do so. In the Christian scripture known as the Great Commission, Jesus is resurrected from the grave and immediately tells his followers:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...
(Matthew 28:19-20, New International Version)

The Church body is called to make disciples, which entails establishing relationship with others, showing them the way of full and abundant life in God, and equipping them with His truth and agency to obey His commands. The unjustified shame surrounding women's sexual self-esteem is

a falsehood that must be addressed in the Church. Negative sexual self-esteem is not a part of God's life of abundance for his people, and the Church is called to teach truth about sexual moral standards and sexual identity.

The Church is called to help untangle falsehood within women's negative sexual self-perceptions. Sex is a gift from God, and the Church has a responsibility to shed light on this truth. Temper Longman (2001) supported this point well when he wrote:

The Church has a tendency to make the topic of sexuality a taboo; it is rarely spoken about or discussed in the context of Christian fellowship. The Song [of Songs], however, affirms the importance of love and sex and provides encouragement and a platform for frank talk about sex among God's people. (p. 59)

As Longman noted, the Church has been silent about the issue of sex—and by extension sexual self-esteem—yet scripture clearly demonstrates sex is a part of God's amazing creation that should be discussed. Longman's commentary on the Song of Songs reveals the scripture as a depiction of a couple's desire for "complete union" (p. 91), a desire which is natural and was intentionally invented by God. As Longman described, the first chapter of the Songs even begins with a woman (who represents all women) and the beauty of her sexual desire as well as sexual quality. This entire book of scripture seems to advocate for celebrating sex and promoting positive sexual esteem. While sex is ultimately a beautiful gift from God, other parts of Bible show that not all uses of sex—both in and outside of marriage—glorify God. Humans can pervert the gift of sex into sexual immorality. Therefore in order to improve women's moral judgement and sexual self-esteem, the Church should both teach about the healthy and beautiful gift of sex as well as clarify the definition of sexual immorality.

Intervention

Sexual self-esteem is crucial to everyone's well being, but the specific focus of this intervention is addressing the justice issue of

women in the church and their lack of positive sexual self-esteem. Altering and developing sexual self-esteem takes time (Powell & Jorgensen, 1985), and therefore interventions across all age-groups of women are important. Due to the concerning findings of Abbot et al.'s study regarding younger religious women and their lack of esteem, this paper proposes an intervention targeted at high school and college-age women.

The intervention should take place in the form of a church-based program with the goals of helping women 1) understand what scripture says about sex and sexual identity 2) bring clarity about sexual values and moral judgements and 3) increase feelings of agency in adhering to moral judgement. The program should be rooted in scripture such as the Song of Songs and passages regarding sexual immorality and should adopt a small group structure to encourage authentic questions and discussion. The program should promote conversation about all forms of sexual behavior (e.g. non penile-vaginal intercourse, social media use, pornography, etc.) and include value-based information as well as scientific material. Ideally this interventional program would take place over multiple weeks (i.e., a 4 week program with sessions once or twice a week), but due to time constraints it may be more realistic to have a conference-like program over a single weekend.

This proposed church-based program would help improve women's sexual self-esteem through several means. Firstly, studying scripture about sex will enable women to understand that sex is a gift from God. This new understanding will allow women to have a more positive view of their sexual selves. Additionally, by openly and proactively discussing sexual morality, women can gain clarity and confidence about their sexual moral standards, thus increasing their sexual self-esteem. Through scriptural study and discussion, women can overcome the taboo surrounding the topic of sex. In turn, this will reveal the truth about who women are as sexual beings and how they can enjoy the gift of sex in ways that honor God.

Success of Past Interventions

Powell and Jorgensen (1985) conducted a study on a church-based program similar to the one described above and found that the weekend-long program was highly successful with high school students. Their evaluations proved the program increased participant's sexual knowledge and information as well as increased clarity on participants' sexual values. This improvement in understanding one's sexual values could lead to further confidence in one's moral judgement and thus improve sexual self-esteem over time. Powell and Jorgensen (1985) concluded from their two week post-test period that improving sexual esteem takes time, and therefore these programs should not be the only opportunity to discuss the topic of sex with others in the Church. Therefore in addition to the specific program intervention proposed above, churches and other religiously affiliated organizations ought to incorporate communication about sex in their normal small group studies, sermons, and other applicable communication events.

Another important source for communication regarding sex exists in parent-child relationships. Discussing sex with parents can be pivotal for forming and clarifying one's sexual identity as well as curbing negative sexual health outcomes (Pariera, 2016). Pariera's (2016) study found several communication barriers for parents in initiating conversation about sex with their children, such as believing their child did not want to hear them talk about sex. In addition to identifying these barriers, Pariera also found that when sex is discussed, children often act as the initiators of the conversation. Green and Sollie (1989) analyzed another church-based, sexual education program and found that it increased the communication about sex between children and their parents. While one-time interventions may not immediately increase one's positive sexual self-esteem, interventions have proven to increase communication about sex within preexisting relationships, which may act as a positive influence on esteem over time.

Gap in Research

While a number of churches have addressed the topic of sex and sexual morality,

there has been little to no research about those programs' effectiveness. For example, the Our Whole Lives church-based, sexual education program developed on the East Coast has received moderate scholarship and appraisal (Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Alliance, 2011), but no tests have been conducted to prove the effectiveness of the program. The gap in internal church-based evaluations and external scholarly research has existed for decades. As Scales and Kirby (1981) found in their examination of "exemplary" sexual education programs, only 3 of the 27 programs actually included evaluations of how the program affected its participants. Furthermore, Scales and Kirby (1981) found the few evaluations that were conducted were insufficient, as they only determined program success through audience enthusiasm, lack of community conflict, and support from staff members. In regard to external scholarship, the author of this paper can attest to the lack of research; she only found two scholarly studies pertaining to the effectiveness of church-based programs, both of which were from the 1980's (Green & Sollie, 1989; Powell & Jorgensen, 1985).

Future Research

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of church-based programs on improving participants' sexual self-esteem. In health communication interventions, measurable evaluations are key to help clarify overall goals, identify effective methods, and adjust future programs to produce greater success (Schiavo, 2014, p. 410). Therefore it is crucial for churches as well as scholars to conduct evaluations of church-based, sexual education interventions. Forming these evaluations before creating and executing the program will foster more intentional planning. The evaluation process should contain both quantitative and qualitative elements so participants are able to reflect on their experiences and conceptualize their key takeaways from the program. Both church leaders as well as scholars will benefit from further evaluation of these

programs because it will indicate what interventions practices are truly effective in improving sexual self-esteem. Christian churches have a large reach and influence over the American population, and therefore it is crucial that religious leaders and academic researchers alike ensure these sexual education interventions are as successful as possible.

Conclusion

Sexual self-esteem is an important aspect of one's identity, and religious women in particular have been burdened with negative sexual esteem. While the causation of this poor self-perception could be hypothesized as a result of social, cultural, or religious constructs, the Christian church has a great opportunity to expose falsehoods regarding sex, shame, and identity. As Longman (2001) indicated, sex has been a taboo topic that many churches have neglected to address in depth. However, the Church is called to disciple people in truth and therefore bring clarity about both sexual immorality as well as the beautiful gift of sex. Methods of this discipleship are actualized within the proposed church-based, sexual education program. The few studies conducted on the success of these interventions have shown the programs aid one's sexual self-esteem development through increasing clarity and communication about sexual values.

In this age of hypersexualization, sexual messages saturate daily life. Unhealthy ideas about sex are communicated through advertisements, music, movies, and more. These external messages may influence people's understanding about sex and their value as a sexual beings. Faith helps develop individuals' internal worth and moral compass, both of which are crucial to navigate these negative external messages about sex. The Church may not be able to stop the negative messages influencing the world, but they can help combat these unhealthy narratives and allow people to understand their true identities. The Church has both the capability and responsibility to intervene in this issue of women's negative sexual self-esteem.

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